

"Yes," answered the girl quietly, "now you know."

Her calm admission staggered him. For a moment he stared at her as if he could not believe his ears. Then he broke out once more.

"But you can never marry him. The law will see to that. Even if he escapes hanging he will be outside the pale. Your father will not allow you to make such a mistake, and when this momentary madness is over you will see reason—you will come back to me——"

"Never!" she answered, "never! Indeed I think I shall never speak to you again."

And before he could reply, before he could anticipate her movement, she turned and fled up the leafy aisle, leaving him standing there, with his face the index of blackest thoughts.

## CHAPTER XXI

### JANET INVESTIGATES

ON the morning following Charles Rowley's arrest on the charge of having murdered Cordery, Janet Selby sat in her own room, thoughtfully considering the miniature of herself which he had left with her. The pallor of her face and the bluish shadows under her eyes told of a sleepless night, whilst the slight frown of perplexity indicated that she was considering some course of action to which as yet her mind was not made up. Presently, however, the frown cleared, and as she snapped the locket she gave a little nod of decision.

"Yes," she whispered to herself, "I will go to

town. I will see Crispi. He can settle the matter, if any one can."

She left her room, and went down to the library to consult a time-table, and shortly afterwards left the house in an open car, driving through Shapland village, which betrayed signs of excitement quite foreign to its usual placidity. When she reached the station she inquired of the chauffeur the reason for this.

"It's the inquest on that man who was murdered. It's to be held in the big room at the *Shapland Arms*, an' everybody wants to get in if they can, Miss Janet. The postman told me about it this morning."

For a moment when she heard this news she was inclined to turn back, and herself attend the inquest. But the unwisdom of this course asserted itself almost as soon as the contemplation of it. She could do nothing even if she did attend, and as it was more than possible that the man she loved would be present under arrest, she felt that her own presence would be painful to him, whilst it would be remarked upon by curious villagers. Accordingly she adhered to her original purpose; and an hour later drove up to Signor Crispi's studio in St. John's Wood, and asked if the signor was at home.

"Yes, Miss Selby, he returned last night."

"And is he disengaged?"

"Yes, Miss Selby," answered the man-servant, "I think he is. Anyway, he has no sitter here."

"Then tell him that I wish to see him, on business—on very urgent business."

"Yes, Miss Selby."

As the man turned to go Janet suddenly remembered what Charles Rowley had said about this man lying to him.

"One moment," she said. "I want to ask you something."

The man halted, and looked at her with a little wonder in his eyes.

"A little time ago a gentleman called here and showed you a miniature of myself. Is not that so?"

The man flushed at her question, but after a moment made the admission:

"Yes, Miss Selby."

"You denied all knowledge of me. Why did you do that?"

"Because Mr. Shapland ordered me to. He said the gentleman was a lunatic, and we did not want you to be worried by him, Miss Selby."

"And he paid you to tell the lie, of course?"

"Yes, miss. He said that on no account was your name to be given, and that if I could manage it, he was not to see the signor."

"Thank you. That is all I want to know; now go and tell Signor Crispi that I am here and that I must see him—you understand, must!"

"Yes, miss!"

The man ushered her into the reception-room and disappeared.

A moment or so later he returned. "Signor Crispi will see you, Miss Selby, if you will please enter the studio."

She nodded, and passed into the presence of the miniature painter, who as she entered rose from a small easel where he had been working, and stepped forward to welcome her.

"Ah, Miss Selby, this is an unexpected pleasure!" The cordiality of his greeting told Janet that the artist was in a good mood, and as he set a chair for her she produced the locket.

"I am sorry to interrupt your work, Signor Crispi," she said, with a glance towards the easel, "but I desire your opinion on a miniature, and any information that you can give me concerning it."

The signor looked interested.

"It will be for me a pleasure if I can assist you, Miss Selby."

She opened the locket, and held it towards him.

"Please look at this, signor, and tell me if you think it is a portrait of myself?"

The interest in the artist's face quickened as he took the locket. He gazed at the miniature carefully for a full minute, then his eyes lifted and carefully studied the girl's face. After a little time he nodded.

"Unquestionably, Miss Selby, it is a portrait of yourself. But why do you need my assurance on that point?"

"Because that miniature was found by another person under rather tragic circumstances, and it may help the elucidation of a mystery if you can tell me all about it. When and for whom did you paint it?"

Signor Crispi smiled and shook his head.

"It is not my work, Miss Selby. I have executed only one miniature for you, and that was delivered but a fortnight ago."

"But," she protested, "your name is on the back of it."

Surprise showed on the artist's face. In an instant he had extracted the miniature from the locket, and was reading his own name on the back.

"Yes," he said, as a puzzled look came on his face. "My name is there, but this is not my work."

"Perhaps there is another Crispi," suggested Janet quickly. "Do you know——"

"There is but one Crispi," broke in the miniature painter with a vanity that under other circumstances Janet would have found amusing, "and I am he."

"Then how——"

Signor Crispi started suddenly from his chair. "Ah, it comes to me. I think I know. Yes, by St. Peter, that is it!"

He picked up a magnifying glass and studied the miniature intently. Janet watched him, wondering what would be the outcome, and after a little time the artist looked up.

"I did not paint this portrait," he said, "but I know who did."

"You know who did?" echoed the girl.

"Yes, Miss Selby. You must understand that a true artist's work is, like handwriting, full of character and of individual peculiarities. It is in a way as individual as the tones of the voice or the feature of the face, and in it the personal idiosyncrasies assert themselves invariably. A year and a half ago I had a pupil who was as great a genius as he was a rogue. This portrait was done by him. I recognize his handiwork."

"Where is he now?" asked the girl quickly.

"I cannot tell you, America, perhaps. There was trouble with the police, and he left me suddenly." Signor Crispi shrugged his shoulders. "Giuseppe was, as I said, a great rogue."

"But I have never given any sitting——"

"Santa Teresa!" broke in the artist laughing. "I remember again. I understand further. If you will excuse me one moment, Miss Selby, I think the matter can be made quite clear."

He rushed from the studio, leaving the door ajar, and a moment later Janet caught the sound

of his voice excitedly questioning some one. After a little time he returned, laughter dancing in his dark eyes.

"It is as I thought, Miss Selby, and very simple. Some time ago I had a visit from the gentleman who came here with you the other day—Mr. Shapland, who I understand is your fiancé. That is so, is it not? He brought with him a photograph of yourself. His wish was that I should paint him a miniature therefrom. I refused with scorn. I do not work from photographs. No true artist does. Giuseppe was in the studio at the time. He heard, undoubtedly he heard, the sum Mr. Shapland offered, for I have just learned from one of my assistants that the rogue intercepted Mr. Shapland as he was leaving, and that your fiancé left the photograph in his hands. Beyond question Giuseppe painted the miniature, and it seems quite clear that he did so at Mr. Shapland's request. Is not that as it appears, Miss Selby!"

"Yes," answered Janet in a low voice. "That seems to be a sufficient explanation of many things."

"Of one thing, certainly, of this miniature. Giuseppe——" He broke off as he caught sight of the girl's face, and stepped quickly towards her. "You are not well, Miss Selby. You——"

Janet, to whom the artist's convincing explanation had been a great shock, pulled herself together.

"It is nothing, signor," she said. "Only a little faintness, due to the heat of the studio."

"Perhaps a glass of wine——"

"Thank you—no. I shall be quite well in a moment. I am greatly obliged to you, Signor Crispi. I have wasted your time——"

"Not at all, Miss Selby. It is a pleasure to have been of service to you, and it is interesting

to discover of what that rogue Giuseppe was capable."

He replaced the miniature in the locket, himself accompanied her to her waiting taxi, and waved his hand theatrically as she drove away, and as he returned to his work wondered what the mystery was to which the young lady had referred.

As for Janet, the dawning horror which had been in her eyes when Charles Rowley had narrated the circumstances in which the miniature had been found was there once more. To her mind Signor Crispi's explanation had been absolutely convincing, and set side by side with the account of Jim Rowley's death pointed only to one thing. She shuddered as she thought of that one thing, and found it almost incredible, because so apparently purposeless, yet could not evade the conviction which had arisen within her. Until she was in the train on her return journey she strove not to think about the matter, but when she was seated in the corner of a first-class compartment alone she could no longer keep thought in check. It surged up like a flood, and in the end she whispered:

"But why should Vernon do a thing so awful? Why? Why? Why?"

The question was still in her mind unanswered when she reached Shapland station. She had omitted to ask the chauffeur to meet the train, and, not desiring to reach the abbey until she had composed herself and grown used to the terrible conviction which had forced itself upon her, she decided to walk. As she left the station, a woman, a stranger, passed out in front of her, and Janet herself paused to speak to the porter at the gate.

"Did the jury bring in a verdict?"

"No, Miss Janet. The inquest is adjourned

for a day or two to make further inquiries, but by all accounts there was no need for an adjournment, for the bit of evidence that was given shows that they've got the guilty man right enough, and most of the jury here a-made up their minds, if the coroner hasn't. It'll be a verdict against that Mr. Rowley, as sure as eggs is eggs. It's all as plain as a bar-door."

Janet offered no comment on this statement. In her heart she was thankful that the verdict had not yet been given, for she was convinced that time would all be on the side of the man she loved. As she walked on she observed the woman who had left the station before her loitering in the road a little way ahead. As she drew nearer the woman looked round, and when she was level spoke to her.

"Excuse me, miss, but can you tell me of any gentleman living in these parts of the name of John Vernon?"

Somehow Janet instantly thought of Vernon Shapland's Christian name, and as instantly dismissed it. Vernon was a fairly common surname, but there was no one of that patronymic in the district that she knew of. She shook her head.

"No," she answered. "I know of no gentleman of that name in this part of the world."

A look of disappointment came on the woman's face, but she inquired further.

"Do you know any one of that name, miss, here or anywhere else?"

The woman was obviously worried, and being by nature sympathetic, the girl did not resent her persistence.

"No," she replied again. "I know no one of that name anywhere."



The disappointment on the woman's face grew more pronounced.

"That's bad," she said, more to herself than to Janet. "I can't have made a mistake. I am sure he said the name of the station was Shapland. He can't have run away and left me. He wouldn't do a thing like that."

She caught Janet's eyes fixed upon her questioningly, and volunteered an explanation.

"It's my husband, miss. He left me in London four days since to run down here, to see the gentleman called John Vernon. He was to have been back the same day, but he didn't come, and since then I haven't had so much as a word from him, and I am a bit worried in my mind, for he wouldn't leave me in London for so long alone, me being a stranger there, and not used to cities."

"I daresay it will be all right," answered Janet sympathetically. "Probably you have made a mistake in the name of the station. There are two or three names on the line not unlike this one. I hope you will find your husband quite safe and sound. Good afternoon."

She nodded, and passed on, whilst the woman, a set look of disappointment on her face, sauntered slowly after her.

## CHAPTER XXII

### A NEW DANGER

THE woman continued walking down the road listlessly and aimlessly. There was an expression of disappointment on her face, which, as she sauntered on, gave place to a look of concern.